

“People were left to scramble onto their roofs with their kids”

Flood victims in devastated Australian regional city denounce lack of government warning

Our reporter
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Residents of the northern New South Wales regional city of Lismore are speaking out about the life-threatening flood disaster that swamped their homes in the early hours of yesterday without any official warning.

After the Wilson River breached the city’s levee at around 3 a.m., the entire lower area of the city was rapidly flooded, engulfing about 14,000 homes. People were left clinging to rooftops for hours, unable to get through to emergency services.

One resident told the media she spent 15 minutes on hold with the SES and a similar amount of time waiting after calling the triple-0 emergency number, while trying to get help for a friend stranded in central Lismore. “She and her three-year-old sat in a kayak tied to a clothesline waiting to be saved for four hours,” she said.

Many people were eventually rescued by other residents who rushed to their aid, often using kayaks and small boats, exposing the lack of official resources. Water up to three storeys high had swept through in the middle of the night, catching people completely unaware.

Roads and bridges were engulfed, adding to the difficulties for people trying to escape the floodwaters, which also stretched for kilometres around the areas surrounding the city. One man is feared dead, after being heard calling for help, but more lives may have been lost. After the floodwaters hit, other people could be heard calling for help from rooftops. As of this morning, as many as 1,000 people remained unaccounted for, with around 400 calls for help yet to

be answered.

Due to an intense rain system that moved south from neighbouring Queensland after flooding Brisbane, the river levels in Lismore far exceeded anything previously recorded. The river peaked at around 14 metres, which is almost two metres higher than the city’s worst-ever floods in 1954, and well above the levee.

Although this level is unprecedented, the extreme weather system had sat over Brisbane and surrounding areas for more than three days, giving authorities time to prepare for a disaster in Lismore, a city of about 44,000 people.

Yet the NSW government’s Special Emergency Service (SES) only gave the order to evacuate Lismore at around 2 a.m., telling residents floodwaters were rising rapidly and that the levee was expected to overtop.

Moreover, this is not the first serious flood in Lismore, the most recent being in 2017, when the levee was also breached. The current catastrophe has laid bare the failure of governments, federal, state and local, to provide protective infrastructure, warning systems and rescue services, especially in the low-lying central stretches of the city where many residents are working class or elderly.

Lismore’s recently released new flood plan only envisages lifting the levee protecting the city to cope with a once in 20-year flood, rather than the historic flood that has devastated the town.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation yesterday morning, Lismore mayor Steve

Krieg said the SES had only two boats on hand to assist survivors in the area.

Anne, a WSWs supporter in Lismore, whose house and car were inundated and wrecked, described how her partner had been saved from drowning by a local man in a kayak. She had been away overnight and could not contact her partner for hours.

“When he stepped off the front porch, he was up to his armpits in water. Later he fell down in the water but this guy rescued him, using his kayak despite being told by the SES that it was too dangerous.

“No one was warned this was going to happen. But some people were saying it was very clear from the weather pattern maps last week that a disaster was coming.

“People had gone to bed on Monday with no warning. No evacuation notices were issued and no alert was raised until 3 a.m. People were left to scramble onto their roofs with their kids. Some people were caught in their roof cavities and could not get out.”

Anne denounced NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet, who told the media that the scenes in Lismore were “incredibly distressing” and the severe weather had been “worse than expected.” Perrottet said the government and emergency services were doing “everything we can to provide help and support as quickly and as safely as possible.”

The premier had “no idea,” Anne said. “There was no SES, only people with kayaks and boats. I rang the SES five times this morning and each time was told it would take seven hours to arrive. The warnings came too late, and there was no knocking on doors to evacuate people. You had to evacuate yourself, with the roads flooded.”

The SES said it received 374 calls for help in 30 minutes, and at one stage asked people with boats to help rescue stranded residents. However, that call was cancelled when the SES declared the situation to be too dangerous. Despite this, local social media pages were filled with offers to help with rescues, and many more pleas for assistance. Before long, hundreds of people arrived with boats.

“Friends had to save each other’s lives,” Anne said. “Local Facebook groups were posting information in real time. There was no power and no phone coverage.” She said it was “shocking” that hundreds of people were still unaccounted for.

Anne said governments had failed to provide the necessary infrastructure and maintenance to protect the population. “The levee was obviously not good enough. And the drains were overgrown, making the flooding inevitable.”

Anne said the local council was still allowing homes to be built in flood-prone areas. When she and her partner bought their house some years ago, they were told that their neighbourhood never flooded. Now, like many others in the city, they face financial hardship, having to repair the house and replace furniture and household appliances.

“Virtually no one in these areas of Lismore is insured for floods. They either can’t get it or it is too expensive. I was quoted \$10,000 a year, with a \$5,000 excess.” The federal government’s emergency assistance grants of \$1,000 for each eligible adult and \$400 per child would do little to help, she said.



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